



Royal Conservatoire *of* Scotland

Embodying the Disembodied:

**How can solo performance connect with non-present beings
and wider systems?**

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Introduction

*How can I
a singular body
in this room
make you see the humans that are not here
the systems that we cannot contain
when it is still
just
me
1*

This dissertation seeks to interrogate how solo performance can connect with non-present beings. My research is an exploration into the paradox of how a singular body can attempt to signal to people who are not present, reveal invisible lives and comment upon the wider oppressive systems they are part of or represent – a task of seeming impossibility. In a political system saturated with statistical rhetoric surrounding bodies, how can we transgress being categorised numerically and comprehend the bodies behind the statistics? Specifically focused on the fatalities of the fire that

¹ Own reflective writing on performance experiments

destroyed Grenfell Tower, I use a practice-as-research methodology to explore how these people can be signaled to and in turn reflect the oppressive systems of austerity that caused their death. I interrogate how use of non-human materials and my 'grievable' (Butler, 2009: 75) body in contemporary performance can be used to enhance wider human empathy and reflect larger political systems. With Judith Butler's theories of grievability and Stephen Greer's writings on martyrdom in performance creating a critical basis for my paper, I weave images from a diptych of performance experiments and creative reflections on my practice to question the relation between the identity of the bodies we view in performance and how this affects an audience's capacity for empathy.

The statistical body

My interest in exploring bodies as statistics stemmed from growing up in London and my reflections on being part of one of the most heavily populated cities in the world. In the past, I have made performance around my body as a statistic, calculating that I made up 0.0000138% of my city and how I found the accuracy of this satisfying but also made me feel quite insignificant. I began to question the ways in which the rhetoric of statistics can be

dehumanising and how it seemed hard to understand that a number so small could represent a body as whole and complex as my own. I used performance to ask audiences to view my body viscerally and not statistically, to attempt to transgress the way in which bodies are categorized and controlled.

Consequently, in this research project I began to examine how in the political and governmental sphere, statistics are the main way we articulate situations such as warfare. If our government has killed 0.025% of a country, this may sound minor and we struggle to view this as a mass of people that are individual and as equally human as us. There have been studies displaying that when people are shown photographs of an immigrant family, they feel warmth and compassion towards them, however if they are given a statistic of immigrant families in the UK, they react negatively (Davies, 2017). This evidences that seeing groups of people as numbers decreases our human empathy. I began to consider the statistics of events in London and immediately thought about Grenfell. I was drawn to Grenfell due to feeling the heaviness and grief of the city at the time and watching as the effects of Tory austerity slowly came into fruition, with Grenfell feeling like a catastrophic amalgamation of that austerity.

When originally exploring statistical bodies, I intended to work with a large group of other bodies, to attempt to literally physicalise a large statistic. However, I realised that it was an unfeasible task to ever physically represent the vastness of the systems I am exploring. Also, when exploring oppressive systems such as austerity, many of the people forming the statistics are non-present due to death, so solo performance felt a productive practice to explore their absence and use my singular body to question my own liveness in a backdrop of non-present beings. This felt a more profound political investigation into engaging with and transcending the view of the statistical body.

The Solo Performance Paradox

The majority of writings around solo performance, such as that of Deirdre Heddon, focus on autobiography. It is necessary to discuss this form in order to place myself and the work I am discussing on the solo performance spectrum. Heddon describes the intention of autobiographical performance as, 'a means to reveal otherwise invisible lives, to resist marginalisation and objectification and to become, instead, speaking subjects with self-agency; performance, then, as a way to bring into being a self' (2008: 3). A lot of Heddon's focus surrounds the role of marginalisation in performance and "Marginalised subjectivities", the catch phrase for those denied subjecthood in traditional Western conceptions' (Bell, 2003: 315). The self-indulgent nature of some autobiographical work is critiqued too, with Heddon pushing the need for political engagement; 'I want (and need) to believe that performance can be a transformational act, contributing to a network of political activity' (Heddon, 2008: 3). Heddon's discussions therefore bring into question the role of solo performance that aims to connect with non-present beings, to signal to the "Marginalised subjectivities" (Bell, 2003: 315), without necessarily being one of them.

My exploration is not typically autobiographical, as I am not trying to pretend that my living conditions or marginalisation mirror those of the victims of Grenfell, who were oppressed primarily due to their race and class. However, it is born from an affiliation to place and situation:

Against any presumed “objectivity” in relation to the production of knowledge, feminists have long argued that the self is implicated in all epistemological endeavours, from the concerns that interest us (and similarly those that do not), to the discourses that we choose (or not) to press into service in our research and explorations, to the critical voices that we assume in our rendering of these. Such unavoidable subjectivity of knowledge is now largely accepted.

(Heddon, 2008: 7)

Therefore, I am working from a place of ‘unavoidable subjectivity of knowledge’ (Heddon, 2008: 7) rather than direct autobiography.

Stephen Greer describes solo performers as ‘threshold subjects who are neither wholly excluded nor fully assimilated, and instead occupy a suspended relation to the social and political sphere.’ (2019: 2). I

am interested in this ‘suspended relation’ of the performer in terms of

what role and responsibility they occupy. In Greer’s “Queer

Exceptions”, he discusses the context of neoliberalism in relation to

making solo work, ‘arguing against neoliberalism’s forms of

compulsory individuation, it presents a case for how solo

performance manifests our precarious, constitutive and sometimes unsettling exposure and accountability to one another' (2019: 2). This seemed paradoxical to me, that the intention of performing alone, was actually to resist individuation and develop compassion and accountability. Heddon references Dolan's ideas around this, 'Performance might inspire an audience to feel, at least momentarily, part of a community, since to be part of an audience is potentially to be allied with others' (Heddon, 2008: 6) (Dolan, 2005). Heddon encapsulates my intentions in developing a relationship of empathy and solidarity between the solo performer and audience. My hope is that this empathy exists for the performer, the rest of the audience, and then extends to the non-present people the work signals to.

This solo performance paradox is delicately put by Peggy Shaw, 'I am a solo artist and, by virtue of that, a collaborator' (2011: 39).

While Shaw is referring to needing to exist in an ecology and depend on others in order to produce work, I also like to apply it to the idea that unless you are making work that is entirely about your own life with no greater connection to systems or communities, you are inevitably referencing others and collaborating with those not present; 'the goal of autobiographical work should not be to tell stories about yourself but, instead, to use the details of your own life

to illuminate or explore something more universal' (Kron, 2001: xi). So, my own practice interrogates the ability of using a small part of my context, in this case my affiliation to London, to comment on structures beyond myself. This ability to use autobiography to transgress the self to 'explore something more universal' (Kron, 2001: xi) is what Selina Thompson displays in *Salt* and this consequently became a key case study in my research.

Salt and Martyrdom

In *Salt*, Thompson uses her own black British identity to introduce themes of colonialism and imperialism, represented by large pieces of salt, making theoretical ideas tangible and visible. Not only does she state that the salt 'is' various individuals, she states that they are also the wider oppressive systems that affect the narratives of the individuals. Her use of the material of salt is what made me draw parallels between her practice and mine, as she describes wanting 'to turn into salt and let my body re-mold' (Thompson, 2018). By destroying the salt with a sledgehammer, she narrates the chain of power between oppresses systems, oppressive people, and herself, placing herself 'from margin to centre' (Bell, 2003: 315).

An excerpt from *Salt*:

This is capitalism, racism, imperialism and God knows what else

Built on violence, maintained by it to

It decides who matters and who will die

It shapes the states

That pressure the company

That corrupts the union

Which grinds down the master

Who polices the officers

They alienate the crew

And terrorize the women

Shouting at her

She's shouting at me

And we're still at sea in the morning

(Thompson, 2018)

She describes 'I wanted the pleasure of taking something big and making it small.' (Thompson, 2018). This echoes my use of concrete when exploring Grenfell tower, using a material that can be held in two hands makes the systems of austerity and power somehow tangible and able to be tackled. However, it is naïve to suggest that performance can miraculously solve the issues we're discussing.

Thompson focuses on the idea of excavation rather than healing, 'Salt for me doesn't create a new set of wounds, it just takes a feeling that I had already and makes it communicable and makes it visible.'

(Thompson, 2018).



In Selina Thompson's interview on Stage Left, the interviewer Jen Harvie asks about the elements of pain and struggle in the work (*Stage Left*, 2018), to which she responds that she never intended for the task to be painful, but realised that it had to be. She describes the reality of living with racism is a pain she is carrying anyway, so the physical labour in the show is not more severe than her everyday reality, it is a parallel (Thompson, 2018); 'The paradox of the martyr, in short, is that they belong to themselves as immediately as they belong to the movement to which their suffering stands testament, and they attest to the truth of that cause precisely because that suffering is both self-willed and not of their own choosing.' (Greer, 2019: 52). This concept of 'both self-willed and not of their own choosing' feels akin to the 'unavoidable subjectivity' (Heddon, 2008: 7) I referenced earlier. The enquiries we follow are reflective of self, no matter whether the work is categorised as autobiographical or not.

In Greer's writing on martyrdom in solo performance, referencing seminal works by artists such as Ron Athey and Franko B, he names, 'staging of endurance also describes the possibility of a resistant and potentially transformative relationship between acts of witness and the communities of complicity which they might invoke.' (Greer, 2019: 77-78). In regard to *Salt*, Thompson describes the

relationship with the audience in these 'acts of witness' (Greer, 2019: 77-78) and the difference between her intentions towards black audience members and white audience members, where discomfort is created for white people watching this pain passively, and potential feelings of solidarity and catharsis for black people witnessing this excavation. This relates to my work around oppressive systems; as an audience, how do we observe our own complicity in the observation of live struggle, as well as our political complicity in the systems the work reflects?

Bauman names the intention of martyrdom in performance as 'the martyr's public suffering may enable a form of solidarity with a smaller and weaker group, a group discriminated against... persecuted by the majority' (Bauman, 2005: 43). In my own use of martyrdom in my work, I exist in a position of privilege, as a white middle class artist. So, how can this 'form of solidarity' (Bauman, 2005: 43) be done, not for solidarity with my own identity, but with the non-present groups I am attempting to signal to? While my white middle class identity feels like a clear separation to many of the lives I am seeking to connect with, my position as artist is also a relevant difference. The fact that I am able to make work around these subjects, living a financially feasible life as an artist, informs the

audience that my oppression is not in parallel to the lives I am enabling solidarity for. In the case of Grenfell, simply the fact that I am visibly alive in the space and others are not, is an overt sign of systemic privilege.

In Amelia Jones' writing on the work of Kira O'Reilly and Ron Athey, she describes that 'empathetic recognition may be constrained by the terms of which bodies and subjects we find grievable' (Jones, 2009: 55). Work like Athey's utilises the societal repulsion to HIV positive, queer bodies. In contrast, I am exploring how using my 'grievable' body can pose questions around empathy. If I am using my white middle class identity, asking an audience to use my body for reference to imagine seventy-two other people and to grieve for them, is this futile and further perpetuates that only certain bodies can evoke this effect? Or, is it a more nuanced than this, with an opportunity to make the audience question their own bias in regard to empathy?

Grievable Bodies

I have been averse to the telling of stories that are not mine and have questioned the ethical line in this project. To what extent can I connect with tragic events such as Grenfell, or signal to people who are dead and therefore have no means to communicate their own story? I was therefore interested in facilitating a performance situation in which I do not attempt to tell the story, but to create an environment of collective mourning. By focusing on the non-present beings, the people who died at Grenfell, I can comment on the wider oppressive systems that caused their death. Judith Butler writes extensively on her theory of 'Grievability' - a word she coined herself. She explains that in global politics, some lives are considered grievable, 'whose life, if extinguished, would be publicly grievable' and others 'leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace' (Butler, 2009: 75). These factors are primarily related to race, class and religion. In "Frames of War", she focuses on how modern warfare depends on inequality in grievability, arguing that global powers justify colonialism and war through viewing certain lives as grievable, and others as not, reflecting ideas of sub-humanism that we see throughout history. If this is how "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2010: 1)

operates in the world of war, it feels directly applicable to the systemic violence of our domestic systems that I am exploring in my own practice. Had the lives affected by cuts in the last decade been considered grievable, we would not be faced with over 100,000 deaths linked to austerity (Helm, 2019).

Butler also goes on to imply how our concept of the morality of death is effected by violence being validated by the state; 'If, for instance, someone kills or is killed in war, and the war is state-sponsored, and we invest the state with legitimacy, then we consider the death lamentable, sad, and unfortunate, but not radically unjust' (Butler, 2009: 41). Capitalism and imperialism are so ingrained that systemic murder is widely accepted and normalised, we are even taught by our leaders that it is necessity. In the oppressive systems of war and austerity, I bring into question 'whose life is effectively transformed into an instrument, a target, or a number, or is effaced with only a trace remaining or none at all.' (Butler, 2009: 20). In Mbembe's article 'Necropolitics', they reference that increasingly, war is industrialised and depersonalised, 'Having become mechanized, serialized execution was transformed into a purely technical, impersonal, silent, and rapid procedure.' (Mbembe, 2003: 18). By mechanising execution, the individuals at the top of the power structure distance

themselves from the violence. By under-funding a hospital or social housing projects, preventing safety and consequently facilitating fatality, direct responsibility is removed as the individuals at the top of the power structure did not 'do' the killing per se. The government simply made decisions about quality of life according to class, and as Ghanim describes, 'a decision about [someone's] life... becomes a decision about [someone's] death.' (2018: 11). The impersonal procedures displayed here are methods to prevent guilt or construct barriers between the oppressor and the oppressed, in an attempt to limit the inherent human condition of compassion and empathy.

In Ghanim Hammami's article "Precarious Politics: The Activism of "Bodies That Count" (Aligning with Those That Don't) in Palestine's Colonial Frontier", she discusses the complexity of 'the coming together of intelligible and unintelligible bodies in an attempt to resist the necropolitics of Israeli settler colonialism in the West Bank' (Hammami, 2016: 167). She discusses that the 'intelligible' bodies were able to occupy different areas, engage in conversations with people in a way that the 'unintelligible' could not, and how this advanced the movement. Some could see this as undermining when 'grievable bodies [are] entering a zone in which the non-grievable are simply fighting for existence' (Hammami, 2016: 167) and there is a

danger of slipping into a saviour complex of sorts. Or, is it just tactical of a group with a shared cause, to utilise the discrimination already in place, to advance the movement? While this is specifically in regard to the conflict in Palestine and typical forms of activism, I want to bring this debate into contemporary performance, and question how I can occupy the position of aligning with and connecting with non-grievable bodies, while (in most ways) being a grievable body myself.

The Architectural Body

In relation to my exploration around Grenfell, I felt the desire to return home to London and visit the context of my enquiry. I took myself to the highest point I could and performed choreographic actions on a car park roof top. I felt that standing as a singular body in the city would help me comprehend the seventy-two people in London who died in relation to the event. I wanted to place myself amongst them somehow or fathom them as lives that the city as a whole had lost. It made me confront why I was still here, and they were not. How you can exist in the same city, but the systems separate your sovereignty so vastly?



as I looked over the vastness of the city

I had the desire to consume it

to hold it all

to grieve with it

to make myself as large as I could

to feel the storm against my skin

to grapple with it

to try and transfer the city into me

to make myself part of it

to make it part of me

2

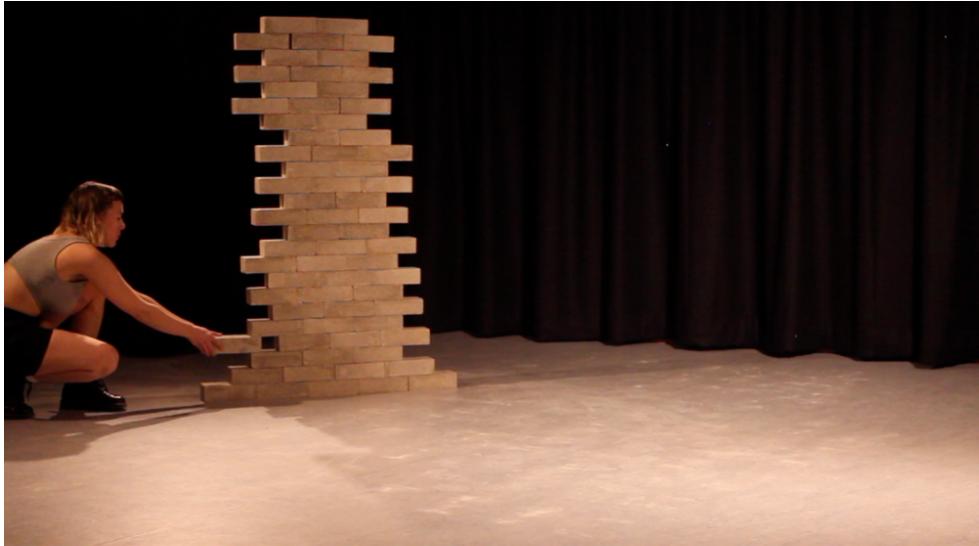
² Own reflective writing on performance experiments

An aim of solo performance is to always be part of something in this way, but as Greer describes, the performer inevitably exists with some distance, 'never fully assimilated' existing in 'suspended relation' (Greer, 2019: 2). My positioning on a rooftop made me feel like I could somehow grapple with the 'suspended relation' (Greer, 2019: 2) between the city and the sky. However, I left the rooftop with a sense of defeat. I did not have a spiritual experience of feeling above the city, being able to hold it, or connect with the lives the city had lost. As I looked over all of the rooftops, I felt overwhelmed. I felt like it was too vast for me to deal with. The impossibility of the task I was trying to undertake became evident. I was interested in my body positioned against the architectural landscape, but the scale of it felt hard to form a relationship with or summon any feelings of tenderness. I consequently decided to conduct my studio experiments with the intention of further exploring this relationship between architectural material and my body and how the two may imprint on each other, but in a way that felt smaller and easier to comprehend.

I carried out a series of studio performance experiments and improvisations with seventy-two concrete blocks, representing the seventy-two lives lost at Grenfell Tower. My actions were performed alongside a sound track formed of a cacophony of sounds from the event, crackling fire and people shouting, with soundbites from interviews with Tory politicians around Grenfell, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg's comment about Grenfell victims lacking 'common sense' (*Jacob Rees-Mogg live on LBC, 2019*) and Theresa May's conference speech detailing that after years of austerity people have 'made sacrifices and they need to know their sacrifices were worth it' (*Theresa May's Conservative Party Speech, 2018*). Each improvisation lasted fifteen minutes, the length of time between the first 999 call reporting a fire in one of the Grenfell Tower flats, to the point that it had reached the flammable cladding and spread to the whole building.



Inspired by Miranda Tufnell's approach to working with material, working off natural urges and impulses to fully explore the potential of the material (Tufnell, 2004), I conducted various rituals and actions. I neatly arranged the concrete blocks echoing the Terracotta Warriors or Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, examples of other sculptural attempts to signify a number of deaths. I gently tipped lines like dominoes and constructed unstable structures and towers. While performing this, I became acutely aware of the danger I was putting myself in, crouching by a tall stack of concrete with no head protection. I realised that while the exercise was not as physically strenuous as I thought it might be, this struggle and martyrdom Greer references was occurring accidentally, much like Selina Thompson describes.



I felt it necessary to create something unstable and precarious. While doing so I reflected on the instability of homes, questioning the materials we make people's homes out of and how this reflects our opinions of those who inhabit them:

precariousness is an ontological condition common to all life... Precariousness refers to and follows from our social existence as bodily beings, always dependent on others for the needs of our survival. Precarity refers to the political conditions that follow when these needs of survival are not addressed... [it] "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death." (Butler, 2009: 25)

(Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay, 2016: 171)

These ideas of precariousness being an innate part of the human condition, and privilege being directly linked to the ability to limit your own precariousness and control your own sovereignty felt key to my explorations. The use of the duration of fifteen minutes in my performances, portrays the immediacy of the tragedy. While working with this length of time, I reflected on the idea of my life ending or changing drastically in such a short amount of time. I felt aware of my own privilege that in the fifteen minutes, my time was spent in a studio, without any sense of urgency, or any fear that I would not make it to the next fifteen minutes. In regard to being able to control

your own precariousness, time is an important element of this. In this case, the precariousness of life is reflected in how quickly safety is compromised. Due to the flammable nature of the building, caused by lack of investment, residents had little to no time to escape. This brings into question if time holds a larger metaphor for privilege and sovereignty? Does money simply buy you time on this earth? With the rich living longer than the poor throughout history, I would argue that the systems we operate in preserve and prolong the lives considered important, and everyone else exists in this precarious state.

Empathy

I looked into rituals of grief and mourning and attempted to handle the bricks with some form of tenderness, in opposition to their harsh texture. Once the tower had fallen, I carried each brick and gently placed it on the ground. I found that while doing this, I became quite emotional and tearful. I realised that I had thought a lot about how the audience might somehow see the bricks as people and feel effected by it but had not considered my own response to this as the solo performer. I identified that I was in turn enhancing my own empathy and grief about the political situation. After lifting the bricks for a long time, the difference in temperature between myself and them became more apparent. I took my clothes off and desired to hold them against my skin. I observed the beads of sweat on my body and the slow fall and rise of my breath lying next to the concrete bricks and I held their cold surface against my own. I identified that in my tired, warm state, this was the point I felt most alive, the most 'here and now' (Heddon, 2003: 5) that I had felt during the performance. While cradling each brick, I began to imagine each as a whole body as complex as my own, and this highlighted the importance of my body in the space to display the juxtaposition in materiality between the human and non-human

objects; presenting a dichotomy between the fleshy warm body and the harsh cold bricks, the alive and the dead. Consequently, this made me (and hopefully the audience) question why my body has been protected and these bodies have not.



Through my explorations, I identified the poignancy of using a present live body to attempt to connect with non-present beings and wider systems, 'Integral to the here-and-nowness of autobiographical performance is the visible presence of the performing subject – their here and nowness too' (Heddon, 2003: 5). How can my 'here and nowness' amongst concrete blocks, make us question who is not present, who is not 'here and now' and why? I aim for this work to enhance human empathy within the audience, to attempt to visualize

a number and as Tim Miller describes, 'The real-time heat of live performing is an especially handy crucible for raising awareness and provoking people into action' (2000: 89). This 'heat' of performing aligns with the intentions of martyrdom, watching a live body carry out live actions has the potential to elicit kinaesthetic empathy for the performer and provoke audience members into action for the cause they represent. In my own practice, I intend for audiences to reflect on the oppressive structures of austerity and the powers that define who lives and who dies.

Conclusion

The paradox of solo performance is that artists often aim to reject the concept of the 'solo' and the individualism that neoliberalism creates. The solo performer is continually attempting to summon something of the world, to unpick, excavate or explode it; the technical impossibility of this is what makes solo work engaging and meaningful. As an audience we are moved by witnessing the human body grappling with ideas larger than its limited surface area. The visceral nature of martyrdom can enhance empathy within the audience, both for the solo performer and the invisible lives they are attempting to connect with.

Within my own practice, the importance of the live body arose as a key discovery through my research. The potential of exploring other non-present beings became dependent on the presence of my own body and its relationship with non-human collaborators. The juxtaposition of materiality between body and object became a poignant meditation on the live and dead. Utilising the positioning of the singular body against empty space or objects to signal to invisible lives, deepened my explorations of grievability and necropolitics. My discovery of the importance of liveness amongst non-human

collaborators will be a continued exploration in my future arts practice, with experiments around the symbolism of materials in relation to political events and further interrogation into embodying ideas wider than my physical body.

I would argue that through solo performance, we can reflect on the intangible, the non-present, the disembodied. Through use of the live body, we can attempt to transgress viewing bodies as statistical data and enhance solidarity for the performer and by extension the lives they are referencing, while questioning our learned societal bias surrounding empathy. I hope that we can encourage interrogation into why the non-present bodies are non-present, and the present body is present, and how this reflects the work's socio-political surroundings.

Word count (including quotations): **4828**

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